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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 007015

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FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/PHD, DRL/IL

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TAGS: PHUM PREF PGOV PREL ELAB TH BM

SUBJECT: EXILED BURMESE LABOR LEADER RETURNS TO THAILAND
DESPITE APPARENT THREAT

Classified By: Economic Counselor Michael Delaney for Reason 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary: In the past week, the Embassy has been sorting out an unusual story involving U Maung Maung, the exiled Burmese trade union leader, and his return to Thailand on November 3 despite an apparent warning by Thai officials that he would not be allowed to re-enter the country. Maung Maung, the son of NLD senior official U Nyunt Wei, has been labeled a "terrorist" by the Burmese government, which has blamed him for a May 7 series of bombings in Rangoon. He was returning to Thailand from the U.S. after a trip to Poland. While he was in transit to Tokyo, his colleagues were strongly urged by a Thai consular official in Washington to dissuade him from returning to Thailand. While Maung Maung extended his stopover in Tokyo to consider his options, his colleagues in Thailand were informed by their Thai contacts of a threat to Maung Maung's life - presumably originating from the Burmese government. The Thai MFA confirmed to Embassy that threat information had been received and that Maung Maung would be denied entrance into Thailand despite possessing a valid visa. The MFA would not explain the reasoning for this action. Nonetheless, Maung Maung re-entered Thailand on November 3 through Chiang Mai airport, apparently assisted by unnamed Thai officials acting without the MFA's knowledge. Maung Maung later told Embassy that he intends to remain in Thailand, although he expects the rest of the RTG to soon discover his presence here. End Summary.

2. (C) The exiled Burmese opposition leader U Maung Maung returned to Thailand from the U.S. on November 3 despite an unusual warning from the Thai Embassy in Washington that he would be prevented from entering the country. Maung Maung is Secretary General of both the Federation of Trade Unions of

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Burma (FTUB) and the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB). He is also the son of U Nyunt Wei, a senior leader and adviser to Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma's opposition National League of Democracy (NLD) party. FTUB officials in Bangkok first contacted the U.S. Embassy on October 31, saying that Maung Maung was already in transit from the U.S. to Bangkok, via Tokyo, when a Thai consular officer warned FTUB members in the U.S. that Maung Maung would be denied entrance to Thailand despite holding a valid Thai visa in his U.S.-issued refugee travel document. When informed by the FTUB that Maung Maung was already en route to Thailand, the Thai diplomat requested Maung Maung's flight information, which the FTUB refused to provide. FTUB members in Bangkok then asked the U.S. Embassy to assist them in communicating with Maung Maung during his stopover in Tokyo to urge him to return to the U.S. Laboff passed the message to Maung Maung through United Airlines staff, which managed to reach him due to a flight delay which forced him to stay overnight in a Tokyo hotel. Maung Maung then chose to remain in Japan while his re-entry to Thailand remained uncertain.

3. (C) On November 1, FTUB members told Laboff that unnamed members of Thailand's National Security Council (NSC) warned them that the RTG had intercepted communications indicating that a person of Burmese origin had been sent to Thailand to assassinate Maung Maung. The FTUB members described their sources as long-time NSC members sympathetic to the Burmese opposition. The NSC members provided the FTUB with the name and general location (the Chiang Mai area) of the Burmese person they were seeking. The FTUB noted that Maung Maung has received similar threats in the past, but never with such specific details. They also noted that the RTG government had, to this point, allowed Maung Maung to operate freely in Thailand since his expulsion from Burma in 1989, and had never before tried to prevent his return to Thailand during his periodic travels abroad. (Maung Maung's travel in this instance was to visit Poland in August to attend the 25th anniversary of the Solidarity movement. He then traveled to the U.S. for a multi-week stay, and to renew his Thai visa, before his planned return to Thailand.)

4. (C) After receiving this information from the FTUB, Emboffs verified that Maung Maung had a U.S.-issued refugee travel document which would allow him to return to the U.S. if he were prevented from entering Thailand. Laboff also contacted Thai MFA officials to determine Maung Maung's visa status and to inquire about any RTG intentions to prohibit

his return. The MFA's North America Division political desk officer did not immediately know of any effort to refuse entry to Maung Maung, but advised that Burmese Prime Minister Soe Win was then in Thailand attending a regional economic forum. The desk officer surmised that Maung Maung may have been prohibited from returning to Thailand during PM Soe Win's visit, and pledged to seek a fuller explanation for the Embassy.

15. (C) On November 4, the MFA desk officer called Laboff to report that Maung Maung indeed had been informally warned by Thai consular officials not to return to Thailand, although his visa technically remained valid. When asked for the reason behind the warning, the desk officer said it involved intelligence information related to a threat to Maung Maung's safety. The desk officer said he could not provide further details, but noted that it was well known that the Burmese government on August 28 had publicly named Maung Maung as the "mastermind" of the deadly series of bombings in Rangoon on May 7. The desk officer said he also knew that the FTUB had various "friends" in the RTG that had already warned them of a threat to Maung Maung's life. Asked if Maung Maung would be allowed into the country if he arrived at Bangkok's airport with a valid visa, the desk officer replied, "No, he will be detained." He said he could not answer further questions about the reasons for, or duration of, such a detention. He declined to speak further on the issue.

16. (C) Shortly thereafter, Laboff received a call from the FTUB advising that Maung Maung had already arrived in Thailand and wanted to meet to discuss his situation. In a meeting arranged in a hotel close to the Embassy, Maung Maung appeared with a colleague from the FTUB and an American advisor, John Osolink, Jr. (Osolink previously headed the Bangkok office of the Asian American Free Labor Institute, now known as the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center. Osolink has been accused in the official Myanmar press of promoting Maung Maung's rise as a labor leader with FTUB.) Maung Maung told Laboff that he had arrived in Thailand earlier that day with assistance from "friendly" NSC officials, who arranged for him to fly from Tokyo to Chiang Mai instead of Bangkok, later transporting him to Bangkok on a domestic flight. Maung Maung said he intended to remain in Bangkok for a few days before traveling to Mae Sot, Tak province, along the Burmese border. Maung Maung said the NSC officials had no further information on the alleged threat to his life. He said he expected the rest of the government, including the MFA, to eventually learn of his presence in Thailand through flight records, but that his NSC contacts were confident he would not be detained now that his legal arrival was a 'fait accompli'. He requested that his presence in Thailand be kept quiet for now, however, "to avoid angering the Thai authorities." He added that the NSC officials were seeking to learn how the Thai Embassy in Washington had been instructed to warn against his travel. They had already determined that there was no official directive in the MFA's cable traffic, and that Maung Maung had not been added to any immigration watch list.

17. (C) Comment: We were initially skeptical of the sensational aspects of the FTUB account, but the MFA's confirmation of key points - namely, the alleged threat and efforts to bar Maung Maung's entry - gave us pause. The Burmese government has indeed ratcheted up its rhetoric on Maung Maung since the Rangoon bomb blasts in May. Two American labor consultants, who consecutively succeeded Osolink as head of the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center in Bangkok, lend credence to the FTUB's information. One is a former Congressional HIRC staffer who has lived in Thailand and known Maung Maung for eight years. "We know Maung Maung has excellent access to members of the NSC," he said. "Those members," he added, "are trying to counter others, led by Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit, who are closer to the Burmese government, and it is not surprising that one faction doesn't know what the other is doing - the MFA being the last to find out."

BOYCE